

Shown are just some of the hundreds of aircraft that have participated in past and present Red Flag exercises. Right, an F-117 from Holloman Air Force Base, N. M. Bottom right, F-16s from Spangdahlem Air Force Base, Germany. Below center, a British C-130 from RAF Lakenheath, England, and a B-1B from Dyess Air Force Base, Texas. Below left, a Marine A-6 from Cherry Point, N.C., is prepared for launch by the ground crew.



Photo by Airman 1st Class James May III



Above, F-15s on the ramp during Red Flag await refueling. Right, two navy A-6s. Below, the crew of a C-17 from Charleston Air Force Base, S. C., brings in equipment in preparation for a Red Flag exercise.



Red Flag: 25 years, still going strong

By Col. Michael Droz
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This weekend, we commemorate the 25th anniversary of the first Red Flag exercise. It's an appropriate time to look back, and to look forward, too.

The first Red Flag exercise, which started Nov. 29 1975, was the brainchild of a true visionary, the late Col. Richard "Moody" Suter.

In the early 1970's, as a major on the Air Staff, Col. Suter tackled an alarming problem: our air combat effectiveness was in a long, steady decline. By one measure, during World War II, we shot down roughly 19 enemy aircraft for every one we lost, but by the time of the Vietnam conflict, that ratio was down to two to one. He saw that our training had not kept pace with our enemies' increasing capabilities, and something had to be done.

Col. Suter also studied the combat experience of our aircrews. He found crews who survived their first ten combat missions had a better chance of surviving the rest of their combat tour, and combat effectiveness went up, too.

Col. Suter proposed creating a "Red Force" made up of some of our best fighter pilots, intelligence personnel, and missile operators. They would receive extensive training in our enemy's doctrine, strategy,

and tactics, and would use equipment that replicated the latest in enemy weapons. With this training and equipment, they would provide a new level of realism in our air combat training.

He also proposed an ongoing exercise, structured around the Red Force, to give our aircrews those 10 critical combat missions in a training environment. The Nellis Range was the logical place to conduct this exercise, which came to be known as Red Flag.

That first Red Flag began with a staff of six in an office in the Air Warfare Center Headquarters building. The Red Force pilots, also known then and now as the Aggressors, flew the T-38 trainer and the F-5 fighter to "replicate" the then front-line enemy fighters. Small, agile, hard to see, and very maneuverable, the Aggressors, with their knowledge of enemy tactics, gave our fighter and bomber crews (called the Blue Force) an unprecedented degree of realistic training.

By the end of that first Red Flag, those first crews had received their 10 simulated combat missions, and led the way for thousands more to follow through successive Red Flags.

Twenty-five years later, our staff has grown to almost 180; our mission has also grown. We continue to focus on preparing new aircrews for combat, yet we have continuously upgraded and expanded

our realistic threat capabilities. We have more sophisticated targets and threat simulators on the Nellis Range. We have a state of the art tracking system called NACTS that lets us watch missions in real time, and record them for replay and analysis later. And as many of you know, the T-38 and the F-5 have been replaced by those unusually camouflaged, brown and blue F-16s you see in the skies over Nellis.

We have trained almost half a million "Blue Force" crews, not just from the USAF, but from our sister services and 23 allied nations as well. Many of them come here for the first time, many others to sharpen their warfighting skills.

But, we're not stopping there! After every conflict, we gather the lessons learned, and try to incorporate them into our exercise scenarios. We are integrating facets of air combat such as combat search and rescue, special operations, electronic combat, space operations, and many more. In the near future, we will be seeing the F-22 and after that, the Joint Strike Fighter.

I'd like to close this by honoring the man who made it all possible, Moody Suter. Col. Suter passed away in 1996, and we paid tribute by naming our building after him. Next time you pass by Suter Hall, stop for a second and consider Moody's vision and genius. The combat air forces owe him a great debt!

Above, members of the 57th Aircraft Generation Squadron check out an F-15 as part of the current Red Flag exercise. Below, Airman 1st Class Richard Nielson, 90th Fighter Squadron, Elmendorf Air Force Base, Alaska, performs a safety check on a missile before performing general maintenance.



Photo by Airman 1st Class James May III